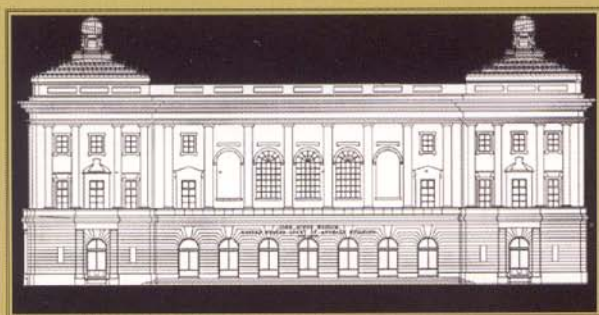

John Minor Wisdom
United States
Court of Appeals Building
New Orleans, Louisiana



*"It is probably the finest courthouse in the country...
This fine old building was built in a time when they
built well... Its preservation means a lot to New
Orleans and Louisiana."*

John Minor Wisdom, 1972

U. S. General Services Administration
Public Buildings Service



Main Photo: East elevation during the construction of the adjacent Federal Building. Left Inset: Detail of roof top sculpture.

History

The John Minor Wisdom United States Court of Appeals Building is one of the most significant edifices in New Orleans. Originally planned to serve as the Post Office and Court House, the building was commissioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in July of 1909. It was designed by the New York architectural firm of Hale and Rogers, the principal architect being James Gamble Rogers. Site preparation began in 1909 and the building was completed and occupied in 1915. Previously, the U.S. Customs House on Canal Street housed all federal offices including the main Post Office and U.S. Court. By the time it moved to the new building in 1915, the Post Office had tripled in size and occupied the entire first floor. The courtrooms and offices of the Federal District Court and the Court of Appeals occupied the second floor, and Executive Branch agencies occupied the third floor.

The Post Office and Court House served the public well until the need for additional space exceeded the building's capacity. The Post Office moved to a new facility in 1961. The Courts moved in 1963 and the building remained vacant awaiting restoration. Rather than lie empty, the spacious building served as a New Orleans public high school for three years, after McDonough #35 was destroyed by Hurricane Betsy in 1965.

By the time restoration work actually began in 1971, caseloads had grown dramatically, and it was decided to devote the entire renovated building to the Court of Appeals. Work began on the restoration in April 1971 and was completed in September 1972. In May 1994, the President signed P. L. 103-256, designating the structure the "John Minor Wisdom United States Court of Appeals Building."



Fish scale keystone in window arch.

Building Facts

ARCHITECT

James Gamble Rogers of the New York architectural firm, Hale and Rogers

CONSTRUCTION

1909-1915

ORIGINAL COST

\$2,000,000

LOCATION

Building occupies a city block across from Lafayette Square on Camp Street

EXTERIOR DIMENSIONS

198' deep by 323' wide

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Italian Renaissance Revival

MATERIALS

White marble walls on a gray granite base; copper roof and corner pavilions

SCULPTURE

Four monumental copper and bronze sculptures by Daniel Chester French on the roof

Architecture



JOHN H. MYERS



MICHAEL F. SUSTENDAL

JOHN H. MYERS

*Main Photo: Ornate marble window surrounded with split pediment.
Right Inset: Bronze Eagle lighting sconce in Courtroom.
Left inset: Lion's head fountainhead.*

In his 1911 review of architecture of the South, author Russell F. Whitehead called this "the most important public building of the New South." The John Minor Wisdom U.S. Court of Appeals Building was built in the Italian Renaissance Revival style. The three story marble building beautifully exhibits this style in its arched openings and consoled windows. The four corners of the building are emphasized by slightly projecting pavilions surmounted by stepped copper roofs. The upper stories of each corner pavilion are divided into three bays by Ionic pilasters supporting the main entablature of the building. The entablature extends around the building and is inscribed with names and dates of service of former Chief Justices of the United States. The Camp and Magazine Street elevations are enhanced by colonnades of eight free-standing marble Ionic columns on pedestals with open balustrades.



JOHN H. MYERS

Monumental bronze lantern enriching the Great Hall.

Inside the building, grand features have been restored to their original condition. The first floor has a vast L-shaped lobby known as the "Great Hall," which is used occasionally for large ceremonial events. The Italian Renaissance styling continues in the ornate bronzed cast plaster ceiling. The Court's law library now occupies the former postal work area of the first floor. The three courtrooms,

located on the second floor, each have elaborate entry lobbies which feature marble wainscoted walls. Interior corridors on the upper floors provide views into the Renaissance-style palazzo courts with beige stone walls, carved stone ornamentation, and red mission tile roofs. Leather-covered fly doors lead to each courtroom. The courtrooms themselves are paneled in highly polished gum wood, and bronze chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Distinctive wall sconces consist of huge white globes (photo at left) supported by bronze eagles in one courtroom and by entwined snakes in another. The center courtroom is, perhaps, the most impressive. Called the En Banc courtroom, it seats the entire Court of Appeals and permits all active judges together to hear arguments in important cases. This courtroom is an immense room, ringed by a walkway on its outer rim. The plaster ceiling of symbols and medallions has been refinished with a bronze glaze giving the room a mellow glow.



JOHN H. MYERS

Colonnaded arches frame corridors in the Great Hall

The Ladies

One of the most striking features of the building is the group of four colossal sculptures placed on each of the four corners of its roof. The work is entitled "History, Agriculture, Industry and the Arts."



These copper repoussé sculptures, popularly known as "the ladies," rest on pyramidal metal bases. Each identical sculpture contains four female figures representing history, agriculture, industry, and the arts. Each group of "ladies" supports an armillary

sphere banded by the signs of the zodiac. Constructed of copper, each sculpture reaches twelve feet in height and weighs one ton. Like the rest of the building, the statues are executed in the Italian Renaissance style, with a regional influence exhibited by the use of palm and banana fronds as backdrops to the sitting figures.

One of the most influential sculptors of the 19th Century, Daniel Chester French (1850 - 1931), created the pieces. French had a talent for translating American types into idealized sculptured symbols. His work dominated American sculpture until after World War I. French's best known work is the seated statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.



At the time the building was restored, it was believed that the statues might have to be removed from the building because their weight was causing the roof to leak at the corners, and the cost of retaining the statues and repairing the roof seemed prohibitive.

The Louisiana Landmark Society was adamant in its desire to preserve "the ladies." Historian Harnett Kane, speaking on behalf of the sculptures stated, "Each group provides a striking part of an unusual design which has dominated old Lafayette Square for fifty years. . . These girls have rejected all temptation, remaining steadfastly in place through the decades. . . through rain and heat and storm. They deserve better treatment than to be turned out after so many years." Thus, "the ladies" remain.



Upper Inset: Detail of rooftop sculpture, popularly known as "The Ladies." Main Photo: The restored sculpture "History, Agriculture, Industry and the Arts." Inset: Pre-restoration photo of sculpture's poor condition.

1972 Restoration is completed at a cost of \$3.5 million. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals re-occupies the building.

1974 The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

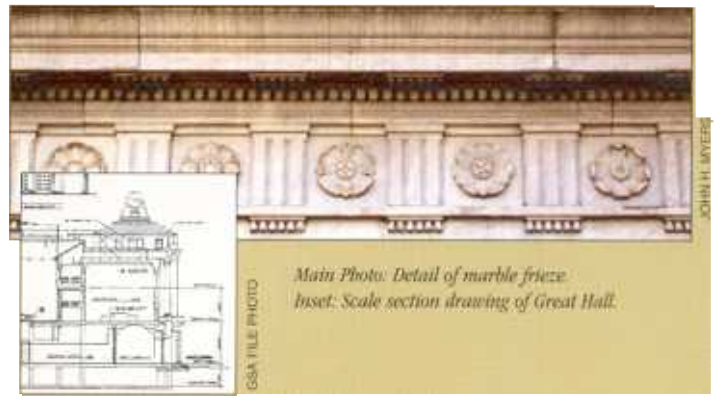
The Architect – James Gamble Rogers

The U.S. Treasury Department, in charge of all Federal building projects at the time, contracted with the well-known New York architectural firm of Hale and Rogers in 1909 to design the second Federal building in New Orleans, the United States Post Office and Court House. James Gamble Rogers, the better known principal of the firm, had a distinguished career as an architect. His designs for institutional buildings were noted for their urban sensitivity and attention to detail.

Rogers' notable works include the planning of the campus of Sophie Newcomb College adjacent to Tulane University, as well as the design of several buildings there. His buildings on the Yale campus are well known, as are buildings he designed on the campus of Rollins College in Florida and the Shelby County Court House in Memphis, Tennessee. He designed one other Post Office/Court House building, that being in New Haven, Connecticut. The historic style often used by Rogers lost favor in the architectural world of the mid-20th Century, thus under-valuing some of his work at that time. The timeless order and symmetry of the classical style, however, will always hold architectural appeal. The classical design of the Court of Appeals building remains a majestic representation of the U.S. judicial system.



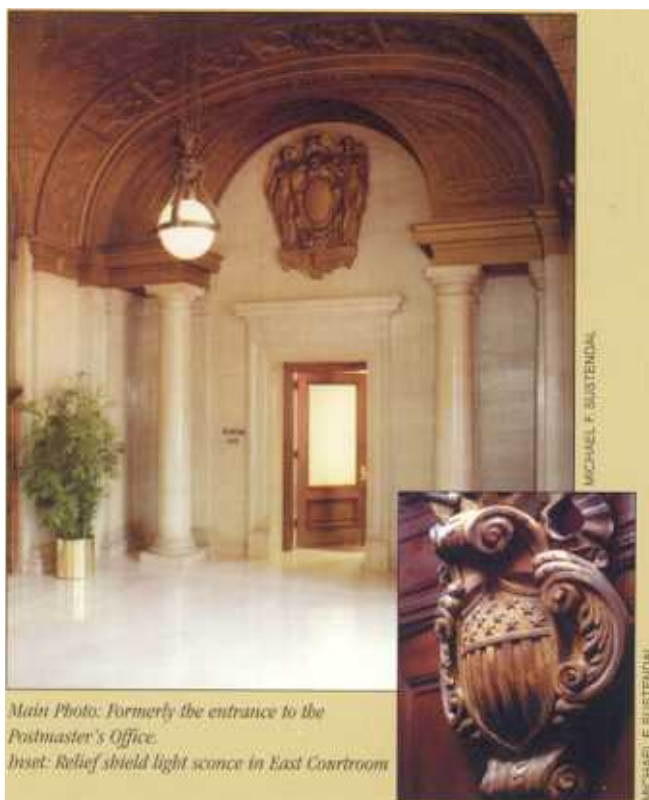
The Camp Street elevation is across the street from Lafayette Square.



Preservation

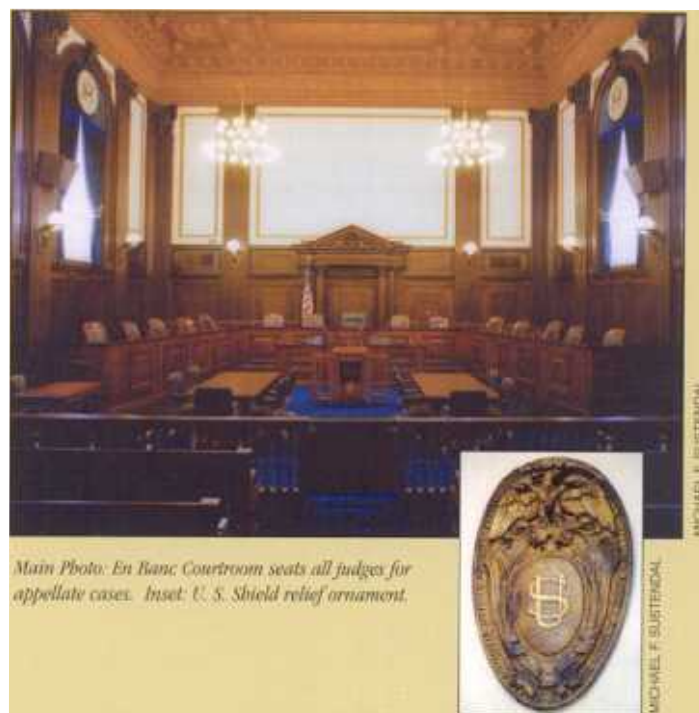
At the time of the restoration of the building in 1973, Resident Judge Robert A. Ainsworth Jr. said, "The facilities here were badly deteriorated and inadequate, it was immediately apparent we could not function." The John Minor Wisdom United States Court of Appeals Building was once known to New Orleanians as the "old Post Office." The main post office occupied the entire first floor of the building and was a popular gathering place for citizens of the city. In addition, the building also originally housed the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, including its libraries and associated offices, and the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana with its associated offices. By 1963, it was obvious that the "old Post Office" building must either be torn down or renovated. Prior to the start of the renovation, there was significant deterioration of the plaster due to water leaks in the structure.

The Fifth Circuit Court and the District Court of Eastern Louisiana moved to the Wild Life and Fisheries Building on Royal Street in the French Quarter in 1963, and Court sessions were held in scattered locations throughout the Circuit. The original plan was for both Courts to be moved back into the building after an 18-month renovation period. One delay followed another during this period, and as the courts grew, it became obvious that the building could not accommodate both courts. During its absence from the building, the Court of Appeals grew from nine to fifteen judges, and the caseload grew from 800 to 2,600 cases per year, making it the largest constitutional court in the United States at the time.



Work began on the restoration in April 1971. The emphasis was on restoration of the grand public places. Original materials were repaired, cleaned, and polished. Replaced sections were meticulously matched so as to be practically indistinguishable from the original. The exterior was thoroughly cleaned. The work included an accurate restoration of the courtrooms, adaptive use of the original first floor postal lobby and the corridors, replacement of plumbing, electrical, heating and air conditioning systems, replacement of rotted wooden doors and window frames with metal ones, replacement of the roof, and the addition of dropped acoustical ceilings, panel work and carpet in the secondary spaces. The \$3.5 million restoration/renovation was completed in September 1972.

After the restoration, Judge Ainsworth said, "This restored courthouse gives us the physical capacity to do an unbelievably voluminous job; they (the U.S. General Services Administration) did a great job of taking a building in a very sad state of deterioration and completely restoring it."



Fifth Circuit History

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, known as the court that integrated the South, protected the constitutional and statutory rights of litigants, and defined the modern rules of admiralty, enters the 21st Century resting on a strong judicial foundation. The Fifth Circuit convened for the first time on June 16, 1891, and adopted thirty-four rules, including that the court should hold one annual term and meet in New Orleans, the largest city in the South at the time. The Court originally met in the New Orleans Custom House on Canal Street before moving to its present site. In 1891, the Circuit was composed of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and the Panama Canal Zone. The first judge appointed was Don Albert Pardee of Louisiana.

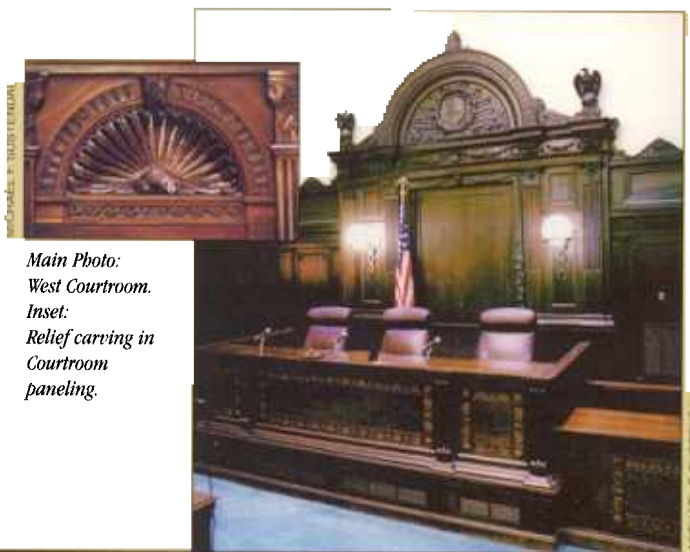
During the first eighteen months the Court heard 86 cases. From 1890-1920, industrial growth in the U.S. produced an increase in federal legislation. In addition, in the 1920s, the oil boom in Texas and the land boom in Florida produced

John Minor Wisdom

shifts in the wealth and population of the country, bringing more cases to the Fifth Circuit. Between 1921 and 1931, the court heard between 172 and 350 cases each year. During this period there was an increase in the number of cases related to tax issues, prohibition, and transportation.

In the 1950s, the past and future of the South collided, and the Court entered into the forefront of American history. A majority of the noteworthy federal civil rights cases of that period were heard in the Fifth Circuit, including the landmark cases that ultimately integrated the Universities of Mississippi and Alabama. In the 1960s, the Fifth Circuit became the guardian of the legal rights of all its citizens, refocusing constitutional law and providing equal access to the ballot box. In the 1970s, the caseload had greatly increased, due in part to an increase in off-shore drilling, which created more shipping and petroleum cases.

By 1970, the Fifth Circuit decided one-quarter of all appellate cases heard in the U.S. In 1980, the twenty-four active judges had agreed to a division of the Circuit. The new Fifth Circuit, formed in 1981, consisted of Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and the Panama Canal Zone. The Circuit Court judges continue to hear many cases, as the Court must accept all appeals, frivolous or not. By 1999, the Fifth Circuit had 17 authorized active judges and six senior judges, as well as over 300 staff members who assist with the business of the Court. Annual case filings topped 8,000 appeals in 1999.



Main Photo:
West Courtroom.
Inset:
Relief carving in
Courtroom
paneling.

"It is fitting that the building that stands as such an important symbol of law and justice in this part of the United States, be dedicated to one of the most brilliant and leading jurists of the 20th Century." These were the words of U.S. District Judge Martin L.C. Feldman at the ceremony dedicating the building in honor of Judge John Minor Wisdom, on June 20, 1994.

John Minor Wisdom was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on May 17, 1905. After receiving degrees from Washington and Lee University and from Tulane University School of Law - where he was first in his class - he entered into the private practice of law. He served in the Army Air Corps in World War II and received the Legion of Merit.



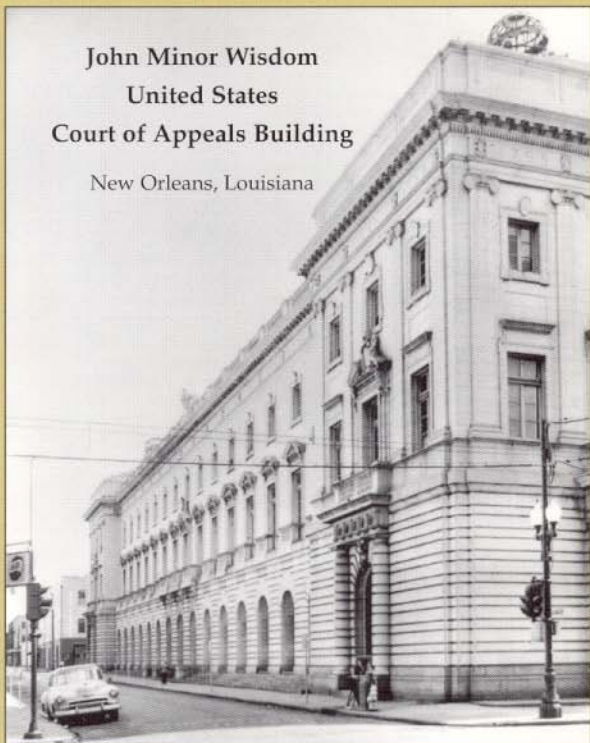
Portrait of Judge John Minor Wisdom

After the war, he returned to his law practice and became active in local politics. In 1952, at the Republican convention, Wisdom was instrumental in securing Eisenhower's first ballot nomination for President. In 1957, President Eisenhower nominated John Minor Wisdom for service on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. His nomination was confirmed and he was commissioned on June 27, 1957.

Serving on the court during the turbulent decades of the 1960's and 1970's, Wisdom became known nationwide for his landmark civil rights decisions, including school desegregation and voter registration cases. Judge Wisdom took senior status in 1977 but continued to carry an active caseload for the next 22 years. In 1993, he received the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. On May 25, 1994, President Clinton signed a bill into law to honor the building's most famous tenant by officially designating the historic Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals Building as the John Minor Wisdom U.S. Court of Appeals Building.

Judge John Minor Wisdom, "the last survivor of the federal appeals court that forced the Deep South to give up segregation" (Associated Press), died on May 15, 1999, at the age of 93.

John Minor Wisdom
United States
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GSA FILE PHOTO



U. S. General Services Administration
Public Buildings Service

1994

The structure is officially dedicated the "John Minor Wisdom
United States Court of Appeals Building."